

Immortality and Forms in the Phaedo

In the *Phaedo*, Plato offers a series of arguments for the immortality of the soul. In doing so, he also offers an introduction to his Theory of Forms. The Theory of Forms is central to his thought throughout the dialogues of the middle period, and it is only in the later dialogues that he begins to make significant revisions to it.

I. Platonism

"Platonism," very generally, is the doctrine according to which:

- i) In addition to whatever sensible particulars there may be, there also exist separate abstract entities;
- ii) These abstract entities do not exist in some secondary or derivative sense, but are as real as anything can be; and
- iii) They exist independently of our thought about them, i.e., they are not the creations or inventions of the human mind.

Various philosophers, ancient and modern, have subscribed to versions of "Platonism." Plato himself held a distinctive form of it committed to Platonic FORMS.

Recall the assumptions underlying the Socratic quest for definitions:

Object of Definition: This form or nature or essence of piety is what we seek in giving a definition, i.e., it will provide the correct answer to the "What is X?" question.

Explanatory Priority: The form of piety makes pious actions pious, i.e., it is what is responsible for their being pious, and explains why they are pious. (6d10-e1)

Ideal/Standard: The form is a standard by which to judge which things are pious and which are impious. (6e3-6)

Corollaries:

1. The answer to "What is X?" cannot be an individual instance of X, since it must be common to all instances.
2. Because the form must be the standard or ideal pattern for X's, it cannot be qualified by its opposite, i.e., it cannot be not-X.
3. Since one role of the standard is to provide a basis for recognizing instances, we can make knowledgeable claims about instances of X, only if we have a definition.

Socrates didn't develop the metaphysics and epistemology implicit in these assumptions, but Plato did.

Two Worlds: The Forms exist in a realm separate from the sensible realm. Forms are eternal and unchanging - this is the realm of "Being"; the sensible realm is in constant flux - this is the realm of "Becoming". The sensible things are related to the Forms, by participating in them; it is in virtue of their participation in the Forms that they have the qualities/properties they do.

Knowledge: The Forms are objects of knowledge; sensible things are objects of belief/opinion. The Forms are grasped through the intellect and are clear; the sensible things are experienced through the senses and are never fully clear, though we can come to know the Forms "through" experience of sensible things. The Forms are ideal patterns (paradigms) in terms of which the sensible realm is explained.

Meaning: The Theory of Forms plays a role in explaining how language attaches to the world. General terms – terms such as "cold," "wise," and "large," that can be predicated of many things – are names of Forms. If we consider how names attach to things, we can see that there is a difference between saying that "this is cold", speaking of coldness itself, and "this is cold", pointing to snow. Plato thought that words attach to (sensible) things by attaching directly to the Forms, and indirectly to the sensible things by virtue of their participation in the Forms. For example, when we say snow that it is cold (meaning that it "has" coldness), this is true because snow participates in the Form of Coldness. Coldness is the cold itself, which snow only imperfectly copies or resembles in being cold. So language attaches to sensible objects in a derivative way through its primary attachment to Forms.

Predication: Sensible things are sometimes F and sometimes not-F, but the Form of F itself is always (necessarily?) F and cannot be not-F. Introduction of two types of predication: The F-Itself IS F; sensible particulars HAVE (participate in) Fness. (Plato sometimes makes the further claim that sensible things sometimes *seem* F and sometimes *seem* not-F, but the F-Itself never seems not-F. *Phaedo* 74b)

Moral/aesthetic standards: The Forms are objective moral and aesthetic standards. They are the true source of value. Contemplation of the Forms is the highest form of moral and aesthetic experience.

I mentioned the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*. The allegory illustrates many of these features. See: <https://web.stanford.edu/class/ihum40/cave.pdf>.

II. Immortality in the *Phaedo*

The arguments of the *Phaedo* can be separated as follows:

- I. The cyclical argument (69e6–72e1)
- II. The recollection argument (72e3–78b3)
- III. The affinity argument (78b4–84b8)
- IV. The reply to Simmias (soul as harmony) (88c1–95a3)
- V. The final argument (102a10–107b10)

I. THE CYCLICAL ARGUMENT

- a) Opposites come to be from opposites (71a), e.g., if something comes to be just, it comes to be just from having not been just; if something comes to be beautiful, it does so from having not been beautiful; if something comes to be large, it comes to be large from having been small.
- b) When opposites come to be from opposites, there is a process by which this occurs, (71a–b) e.g., shrinking, growing; waking, falling asleep, etc.
- c) Death is the opposite of life; and things come to be dead from having been alive. (71d)
- d) Opposite to dying there is a process of coming to life. (72a)
- e) If something comes to life, it must have existed before birth. (72a) (The things that die come to life, and the things that come to life die.)
 - If the process is not cyclical, the same things being reborn as have died, then all things would end up dead. (72a–b)
- f) Therefore, the souls of things must exist when not alive (before birth and after death), and undergo the processes of dying and coming to life.

Points to note:

- Death here is something the soul may undergo without going out of existence. The soul both dies and comes to life. It underlies such alteration. Death and birth are understood on the analogy of becoming cold and becoming warm.

Problems?

- 1) (e) only shows that there must be something before birth, not that the soul exists after death. Nothing comes from nothing rules out ex nihilo becoming, but not destruction...coming to be is alteration, but must we say that ceasing to be is alteration?
- 2) We don't get any understanding of what the subject of change is like: why think it is anything like an (individual) soul?

II. THE AFFINITY ARGUMENT

- a) The world consists of two sorts of things: the things which are divine, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, deathless (eternal), [invisible, incomposite] and the things that are not.
 - Are we supposed to get these conclusions from recollection argument?
- b) The soul is more like the former in the following ways (this is seen especially if we consider the soul of the philosopher which has been purified of bodily influences):
 - i) it is invisible
 - ii) it is closer to unvarying than constantly varying
 - iii) it rules the body and so is more divine

- c) Therefore, the soul is plausibly one of the incomposite, indissoluble, deathless things.

Problems?

- 1) The analogy is weak: we don't get obvious similarity of the soul in the crucial respects. In particular, there are things which are invisible and incorporeal (the harmony), and possibly incomposite (material elements?), which aren't among the divine class of things Socrates mentions. Why should we accept (a) or the inference? We surely shouldn't accept that because something is invisible and incorporeal, it is eternal (e.g., harmony).

Socrates' reply to Simmias (91d). Simmias suggests that the soul is a kind of harmony or attunement, analogous to that of the lyre, in some sense distinct from the body (wood, strings), fine, 'akin to the divine', but nonetheless dependent on the body (wood, strings) and unable to survive the body's destruction. Socrates reminds Simmias of the Recollection argument, which Simmias accepts: although that argument implies only that the soul pre-existed, not that it is eternal, it nevertheless conflicts with the harmony theory (92b) since the soul pre-existed *without a body*. A second reason for thinking the analogy with the lyre does not hold: the soul directs, controls, the body, whereas the harmony is directed by, controlled by, the wood and strings (94c).

III. FINAL ARGUMENT

- a) An opposite (itself) will never become or be its opposite, while still being what it was; either it goes away or is destroyed when that happens. (103a) I.e., opposite FORMS themselves never admit their own opposites, but give way or perish. (Cold never admits hot; even never admits odd.)
- b) In addition to the opposite itself, there is something else which has the character of the Form, whenever it exists. (103e) (Snow and fire; two and three.)
- c) Those things which always contain the Form, are like the Form insofar as they too never admit the opposite of that Form, (but will either give way or perish). (104b) (Snow never admits hot; two never admits odd.)
- d) If something brings the Form into that which it occupies, it will not admit the opposite of the form. (105a)
- e) It is the soul in a body that makes the body alive. (105c)
- f) Whatever the soul occupies, it brings life to. (105d)
- g) The opposite of life is death. (105d)
- h) The soul will not admit death; if death approaches, the soul will give way or perish. (105d)
- i) If the soul will not admit death, it is deathless. (105e)
- j) If the deathless (deathlessness?) is indestructible, then the soul is too. (106b)
- k) The deathless is indestructible. (106c)
- l) Therefore, the soul is indestructible. (106c)

Points to note:

- Does Plato need to put forms in things which carry them (see (b)) in order to avoid the conclusion that there is one common soul, i.e. to get individual souls?

Problems?

- 1) Is the cold itself indestructible? Then why isn't snow, on the same principle?
- 2) He needs not only to show that the soul is deathless, but also that it is indestructible: it may be such as never to admit death, but by perishing when death approaches.

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